

# Gaspee

## THE SPARK THAT IGNITED THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

### In the 1700s...

Maritime trade was an important part of the Rhode Island economy. When the British Parliament imposed new taxes to help pay off debt accumulated during the French and Indian War, those taxes affected everyone who bought and sold goods in the colony. Many local merchants resorted to smuggling to avoid taxation.

### This led to...

Britain retaliated by stationing naval vessels in New England waters to patrol for smugglers. HMS Gaspee was one of these vessels, sent to Narragansett Bay in February 1772. Her commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston, quickly gained a reputation for his aggressive pursuit of local ships and cargo.

Rhode Island Governor Joseph Wanton wrote to Lieutenant Dudingston:

Sir, A considerable number of the inhabitants of this Colony have complained to me of your having, in a most illegal and unwarrantable manner, interrupted their trade, by searching and detaining every little packet boat plying between the several towns.

*“I will hang them as Pirates.”*

The Governor's letter prompted an angry response from Admiral Montagu of the Royal Navy:

I am also informed, the people of Newport talk of fitting out an armed vessel to rescue any vessel the King's schooner may take carrying on an illicit trade. Let them be cautious what they do; for as sure as they attempt it, and any of them are taken, I will hang them as pirates.

On June 9, 1772, a group of Rhode Islanders took matters into their own hands.



With Gaspee aground, they planned and carried out an attack.

Governor Wanton issued a proclamation offering a reward for information about the attackers. Two months later King George issued his own proclamation and established a commission to investigate. The king also declared that anyone accused of participating in the attack would be sent to England for trial. This infuriated colonists who believed they had a right to be tried in their own community.

The Gaspee Commissioners spent six months investigating; however, most Rhode Islanders claimed to know nothing about the attack or offered contradictory accounts. Finally, on June 22, 1773, the Commissioners submitted their final report to King George. They concluded that the information they had gathered about supposed participants did “not induce a probable suspicion, that persons mentioned therein... are guilty of the crime aforesaid.”

*No one was ever brought to trial for the Gaspee attack.*

The Gaspee attack and the investigation that followed highlighted growing tensions between colonial governments and the Crown. Did colonists have the right to be tried on their native soil? How much power did local governments really have?

THESE AND OTHER FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SOVEREIGNTY AND COLONISTS' RIGHTS EVENTUALLY LED TO FULL-SCALE REVOLUTION IN 1775.

1763	February 1763 – The Treaty of Paris ends the French and Indian War, and begins a period of increased attention to colonial affairs.	1764	April 1764 – Parliament passes the Sugar Act, which taxes sugar and molasses. Rhode Island merchants use both in the production of rum, so this tax is very unpopular.	1764	July 1764 – Governor Stephen Hopkins authorizes Newport residents to fire on the HMS St. John in retaliation for allegedly stealing goods from Newport merchants.	1765	March 1765 – Parliament passes the Stamp Act, which adds a tax to many paper goods.	1765	September 1765 – Rhode Island's General Assembly opposes the Stamp Act and passes a set of resolutions restating their rights as British citizens and the colony's “exclusive Right to lay Taxes and Imposts upon the Inhabitants of this Colony.”	1765	October 1765 – Representatives from nine colonies, including Rhode Island, convene the Stamp Act Congress to discuss unified action against new taxes imposed by Parliament. Some colonies with royally appointed governors do not send delegates.	1769	July 1769 – A group in Newport attacks and burns HMS Liberty in retaliation for Liberty's seizure of two Connecticut ships.	1770	March 1770 – In the “Boston Massacre,” a fight between English soldiers and colonists leads to gunfire and the deaths of five colonists.	1772	February 1772 – Lieutenant Dudingston seizes a cargo of rum from the ship Fortune, owned by Nathanael Greene's family business.	1772	June 1772 – Rhode Islanders attack and burn the HMS Gaspee.
1772	November 1772 – Samuel Adams organizes a Committee of Correspondence to share information within and between colonies about events like the Gaspee attack and other colonial matters. In the following years, other colonies form similar committees.	1773	December 1773 – During the Boston Tea Party, colonists dump 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor to protest the Tea Act.	1774	Spring 1774 – Parliament passes a series of four acts known as the Coercive (Intolerable) Acts. The most concerning act restates England's authority to bring accused criminals out of their home colonies and back to England for trial, as had been threatened to the Gaspee attackers.	1774	May 1774 – In a town meeting, Providence leaders call for a meeting, or congress, of representatives from each of the colonies. This becomes the First Continental Congress.	1775	March 1775 – People gather in Providence's Market Square to burn tea and “obnoxious English papers.” Observers describe women feeding 300 pounds of tea into the fire.	1775	April 1775 – Battles in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, mark the beginning of full-scale war between the British and colonists.	1775	June 1775 – Rhode Island's General Assembly passes a resolution to establish a navy for Rhode Island and names Abraham Whipple, one of the Gaspee attackers, commodore.	1776	May 1776 – Rhode Island's General Assembly passes a law, the “Act of Renunciation,” ending the colony's allegiance to King George III.	1776	July 1776 – The thirteen colonies formally declare their independence from England with the Declaration of Independence.		

Colonial events  
Rhode Island events

